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## WHEN THE TREES CROSS THE TREES

By Laren Grey

The scent of pine and soil crept from the forest after a brief rain. The beach, just two hundred yards away, was beyond sight and smell. The boy marched along a sandy dirt road and studied pine trees as they passed. It was always the same parade, but never lost its magnificence.

Excitement built within him. Ahead was a bend in the road near a forest of birch trees. He prepared to run. His heartbeat pounded into his neck and his ankles became springy. The way the slender trees crossed each other stalked him. They seemed to watch him from curious stances. The disorientation made his legs stumble like a dentist had injected Novocain into each kneecap. He stumbled forward but could not turn his eyes away from the haunting grace of the passing

birch trees. They danced and circled. Each seemed to twirl in endless depth, watching like upright snakes. Some moved closer, and some moved faster than others. After a full sprint out of sight of the birches, his jelly legs stomped into the dirt as he approached his home, a cinderblock beach cottage flanked by pine green forest and green-gray bay.

“Mom, I’m home!”

The sweet rotting scent of mulchy leaves and pine faded into the musk of salt water and muddy brine.

The screen door screeched and banged shut behind him.

“What did you get?” his mother responded over the clinking sand clanking sound of oysters being shucked. She washed her hands, then turned off the water and entered the living room, wringing her hands with a dish towel.

“Mister Sandborn and Old Man Jimmy gave me a whole bag of candy!”

“What were those old salty dogs gossiping about today?”

“The usual stuff, but also about The Civil War. They said there was some fighting around here, in these woods. Old Man Jimmy said he would find old musket balls when he was a kid.”

He stirred his hands in the bag of sweets and pulled out round candies and studied them as if they were musket balls.

“It is your birthday, but you can share some candy with your baby sister,” she ordered.

“A little bit of chocolate seems to make her terrible twos not so terrible,” she added.

“I bet baby Tina would like to break free from that wooden cage and eat all the candy.”

“She better not,” his mother said with a serious, sinking brow. “How does it feel to be ten?”

“Oh, mom, it feels more like I’m a grown up,” he said, flexing his scrawny arms, “I didn’t think it would be any different, but it sure is. I can even run faster. I feel more responsible.”

“What do you want for your birthday?”

“A rowboat or a canoe.”

She gave no sign. Not even a flinch. Her poker face was seasoned.

“It is amazing,” she said, leaning against the door frame and gleaming at him, “You were born ten years ago today in nineteen seventy-five at 5:19 pm. I wasn’t even twice your age then.”

His baby sister stood up in her crib and gripped the wooden bars and peeked through them.

“Baby Tina, do you want some chocolate?” He unwrapped a piece.

The toddler squealed. He handed her a piece of soft chocolate through the wooden bars of the crib. He turned and clicked the knob of the TV and Bob Barker sparked to life and announced the importance of getting your pet spayed or neutered.

“Oh dammit. I missed The Price Is Right!”

“Watch your mouth,” she said. “Hey, I’m not supposed to tell you yet, but your birthday present is behind the house, but you can’t take it out until your father gets back tomorrow afternoon.”

The boy burst through the door and around to the back of the house. There a rowboat leaned against the cinder block wall.

“Yes!”

He grabbed a can of green paint from the shed and began slopping it on the wooden rowboat.

Late at night a mosquito sucked his neck like a vampire through the window, waking him. Tin toy soldiers stood facing each other on the window sill, one blue, one gray, holding muskets in a strong eternal stance, each awash in green moonlight beaming through surrounding pines. Stars twinkled between the canopies of needles. The commotion and feet crunching through the leaves of the woods startled him, followed by gunfire flashes. He sat up in his bed to look out the window and watched the glow balls of firing muskets. Faint lanterns moved like fireflies through the trees and another muzzle flashed a glowing ball of smoke. The tin toy soldiers continued to stare each other down.

The gunfire passed like a slow storm and faded deep into the woods. A gentle hush of waves and cricket song pulled him back down under his covers.

The next morning the boy woke to the smell of bacon. Upon opening his eyes and looking out the window, he discovered his two tin toy soldiers were missing. He looked all around the window and did not find them.

The sun was breaking above distant clouds on the horizon in a peach with hints of blue beginning to form. The boy scanned the wet sand as he walked. The rhythm of the tiny waves along the beach was precise, skirting a still glass bay that emptied into the horizon, as if turning to crank the entire bay into a start with a dead battery. The beach sand was wet grit with pebbles scattered like marbles, some blue, opaque, pink, white, and smooth. It was arrowheads he sought, primitive gems left by advanced spirits. Each was a window into another world, never seen by human eyes since the day they were lost. Each arrowhead was a direct connection to a craftsman

of the past. Each was a tiny spark that lit ablaze the inferno imagination of an old soul child that was ahead of his time and stuck in the past.

After two hours, no arrows had pierced through him. Spirits were low, but seagulls were optimistic and cheered him further along the narrow beach. Ahead, a large sandy object protruded. Maybe it is a rowboat, he thought, and he dashed towards the dream.

Getting closer, the form became obvious: a giant sea turtle stranded upside down on the beach. The eyes of the turtle cried for help. The teary orbs were the only sign of moisture on the creature. He pressed and dug his feet into the sand, but the creature did not budge. He brushed sand off of the turtle then raced to the edge of the woods and brought back logs. He ripped sand away from the sea turtle and arranged the logs like rollers to push the beast back into the mysterious depths. It took an hour and all his might to get the hefty turtle to the water's edge. Like a dense rowboat, he heaved it towards the water. It flapped its flippers when water splash against its shell.

He needed one more log for the water chariot to reach the ancient god. The tide was moving out. He hiked into the woods in search of a perfect log for the job. Turning, he could no longer see the bay through the pines. The woods became still. Gentle campfire smoke moved past like a ghost.

He crept through the pine woods towards the light smoke and entered a clearing. The smoldering campfire was in the middle of a sparse camp. He approached the fire and knelt on a blanket next to it. Placed next to the fire was a steel ladle and a clamp for making musket balls. On the blanket inside a tin pan were a few musket balls and the two metal toy soldiers from his window sill.

“Musket balls.”

With a log in his arms, he returned to the shore and saw the last glimpse of the turtle dipping into the bay.

At home he tore through the shed and grabbed a gardening trowel, then headed into the woods, kicking mushrooms at every chance. He stopped at areas and dug where his imagination told him a musket ball might be. No luck yet.

He looked up from scanning the ground. Ahead, the white ashy birch trees were staring at him. They swayed with excitement. He was far from the cottage, but the dirt road was near.

“I’m ten now,” he said out loud to himself, “I’m not afraid of trees anymore”. He marched forward into the birch forest, determined to find musket balls or a ghost. The birch trees smiled.

When he entered the forest of birch, the air grew colder. The trees brushed his shoulders and swirled around him. He swirled too. The trees whispered and crossed back and forth. He bumped into a cluster that shifted, then turned and bumped into more. Soon the birch trees surrounded him and he could not pass between two of them. He clutched them and tried to pass through them sideways but would not fit. The birches tightened and formed a cage around him. There was no escape. Beyond the cage an audience of birch trees surrounded in varying depths. They crossed each other gently and circled the cage slowly. Each found a spot. They settled and breathed and swayed as they studied the captive boy. He fell to his knees and wept.

“Don’t cry,” a voice echoed.

The boy fell back startled, then stood up. Between the birch bars of his cage he saw a boy looking in, an older boy, a mirror image studying him, but dirty and covered in tattered gray wool with a musket slung over his shoulder. They studied each other’s faces and clothes.

“You look like me.”

“And you look like me.”

“Why are you dressed like a soldier?”

“Why are you dressed like a clown?”

The boy looked down at his own yellow, red, and green striped polo shirt.

“I’m not dressed like a clown. It isn’t Halloween. Why are you dressed up like a soldier?”

The Civil War was over more than a hundred years ago. I know because I’ve been learning about it.”

“I am a soldier.”

“What kind of soldier?”

“I am Private James Richard of the Confederate Army under Major General Pickett.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “But my name is James Ri... Did you say Civil War? The Civil War ended in eighteen sixty-five. A hundred and twenty years ago. How old are you?”

“It’s the year eighteen sixty-two now, and the war is on, and I do believe we are gonna whip these Yankees sooner than that.”

“But it’s nineteen eighty-five. Yesterday was my birthday. I’m ten.”

“I ain’t but fifteen, but I’m a proper soldier, and it is eighteen sixty-two. I know cuz I been soldiering for a year and I joined up in sixty-one.”

“A real soldier? A Johnny Reb?”

“Uh huh. You got a problem with that, clown boy?”

“No offence, but the north has better uniforms.”

“Don’t matter.” They stared at each other like mirrors of time with a five year gap between their faces. “I’m with a small unit bringing correspondence to Richmond,” the soldier

continued, “but we got cut off and came the long way in search of a ferry to take us across the Rappahannock.”

“But the river ferry is miles away.”

“We got pushed this way.” The soldier dropped his head. “Yankee patrols. They know we’re down here. They hunting us.”

In the distance a skirmish of gunfire and yelling erupted. The young soldier turned his eyes towards the sound of the action. The booming of muskets grew louder.

“If you are a soldier, then help me get out of these trees.”

“How do you reckon you got stuck in some trees like this? If you got in, then sure you can get out.”

A retreating group of men in blue rushed past them and fired random shots from behind trees. The young soldier crouched and became nervous and still. A horrendous yell formed a wall that pushed through the smoke and drove forward. Fury dressed in tattered gray ran in, firing shots and reloading and firing again, driving the blue Union soldiers deeper into the woods. The rebels continued firing in their direction.

“Come on boy! Charge forward!” said one Confederate as he slapped at the young soldier’s hat.

The young soldier pulled on the birch trunks with all his might. The surrounding birch trees leaned in and found the soldier’s effort amusing.

“I gotta go,” said the young gray soldier, itching to fight, “sorry, clown boy.”

“Hey don’t just leave me here!”

The gunfire faded farther into the woods and disappeared. The young soldier vanished like a phantom into the clearing smoke. Soon the birch forest was quiet except for the slight

murmur of birch trees whispering a gentle commentary about all the action. Only the residue of gunpowder remained in the air.

The boy sank to his knees again. He listened for more gunfire but heard nothing except for the breathing of the ghostly birches. He pressed his head into the gap between the birch bars of his jail cell. There was no escape. The silence of the woods became a prison as the afternoon moved shadows across the forest.

“Stand back. I’ll chop you loose, but then I gotta go.”

The boy turned and sprang back as the young soldier knelt and pulled a hand ax from his back pack. The watching birches gasped and leaned back and became still with horror.

“Thank you for coming back.”

The soldier raised his hand with the ax ready to strike when a horrible succession of strange horn blasts sounded from the nearby dirt road. A sleek silver car rolled past and honked several times, kicking up dust behind it.

“I have never seen a car like that before,” the boy said, pressing his face between the birch bars. “It is fancy.”

“What’s a... a car? Like a boxcar? It looks like a silver train with no tracks. A metal wagon with no horse. What is it? Why is it tootin’?”

The soldier dropped his ax and fell back, shaking and wide-eyed.

“Hey clown boy,” the soldier continued, “is this some kind of circus show?”

“I told you I’m not a clown!”

The soldier took off running into the direction of the car.

“Hey don’t leave me here! Again!”

The young soldier dashed through the woods clutching his musket rifle. He sprinted alongside the flashy silver car until it pulled up to the cinder block cottage, honking. He dove behind low brush and studied the slender boxcar with no rails.

“What in the hell is that?” he said out loud to himself.

A girl emerged from the house. She was in her late teens with pink hair with black tips. A man exited the vehicle. He was a man in his late fifties, sharp-dressed with pepper gray hair.

“Hi Tina!”

She rushed to his arms and hugged him tight.

“Dad! I’m so happy you weren’t hurt in the attacks.”

“Some of my colleagues, friends, weren’t so lucky. It’s been two weeks and I still can’t believe it. Like a bad dream. Do you remember Ira? He worked on the fifty-third floor. They still haven’t found him.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I never imagined a root canal would save my life. I wish everyone had a root canal that day.”

They fell silent. She saw their reflection in the shiny sports car.

“Nice car, dad.”

“You like it?”

“I love it. You drove that all the way from New York?”

“Yes. I drove it here because... it’s yours. Your late high school graduation present. Better late than never.”

“Wow Dad! Really?”

“Yep. A brand new 2001 Dodge Viper. Right off the lot. I hope you like silver.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“You earned it. You’re going to Yale, so you should go in something fancy. Someday you will be Dr. Tina Richard.” He smiled.

She paused, staring at the curves of the Viper. “I wish Mom was here to see this,” she said. Her eyes studied wheels. “And James too. He liked cars.”

“Do you remember anything about your brother? You were so young.”

“Yes. I do. My earliest memories. He would slip chocolate to me through the bars of my crib.”

“Your mother and I tried for years to find him. The only sign was his row boat beached not too far from here. He had painted it green like a turtle. He loved turtles. The Coast Guard and volunteers helped us search, and your mother never stopped searching until the end. Every day she would watch the bay. I can still see him as clear as if it was just yesterday.”

At that moment the nearby brush crackled, startling them. They turned and saw the wide eyes of the young soldier before he fled into the woods.

The young soldier raced through the woods toward the birch forest and slid on his knees to the birch cage and chopped at them with his ax.

“What happened?” asked James.

“You gotta go home, clown boy.” He hacked at the trunk with urgency. “I think you are in the wrong place. I am in the wrong place. We in the wrong place. Time. Place. We both got places to be.”

He blew heavy with each strike. The surrounding birches swayed in horror.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t understand what my eyes seen today, but I know that we don’t just look alike.

We are alike.”

“I don’t know if you are five years older than me,” said the boy to the soldier, “or if I am a hundred and thirty-eight years older than you.”

“Boy, you might be twenty-six years old.”

“What?”

The birch buckled. A few more chops and it fell.

“Go. Get home.”

“Ok. Thank you. I owe you one.”

“Don’t you worry about me, clown boy.”

Young James sprinted to the dirt road and then towards his house. There his father stood, with graying hair, and the girl looking into the window of the silver Viper. He ran to them and stopped. He looked at the car and then his father’s hair and then the girl’s pink hair.

The man looked at the boy and stepped forward. Tina watched her father’s face and also the boy. She recognized him and tears fell to the dirt.

“James?”

“Dad? Tina?”

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End